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AUTHOR Hausfather, Sam
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ABSTRACT

This paper reports from an observant participant's point of view on a theme study conducted in a fifth-grade classroom at a laboratory elementary school of a small, private liberal arts college in Georgia. The "Theme Study" is a student-centered approach that "emphasizes a coherent and holistic approach to learning through the study of broad themes rather than compartmentalized subject areas." The study discusses the basic four components for theme study: (1) planning; (2) researching; (3) synthesizing; and (4) presenting. The themes presented include: (1) "Why are we Here?" (geology/geography); (2) "Native American Studies" (changes); (3) "Exploring the Unknown" (early U.S. explorers/astronomy); (4) "Taking Off on Investigations" (pioneers and heat energy); and (5) "Greed and Charity" (slavery and the Civil War). Contains 36 references. (EH)

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Creating a theme study classroom around "big" questions:

Opportunities and constraints

Sam Hausfather

Berry College

Mount Berry, GA 30149-5019

shausfather@berry.edu

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Creating a theme study classroom around "big" questions: Opportunities and constraints

This is my story, the story of a teacher and his class together constructing a theme-study curricula. I recently completed a year-long study of my own classroom as a researcher returned to the classroom as a teacher-researcher (Hausfather, 1994). Studying my own practice, I intended to create a theme study classroom. I explored the processes and constraints of implementing theme study from a teacher's perspective. In the process, theme study was redefined for me, as I realized the power of "big" questions to promote a community of inquiry within the classroom.

Methodology

This study took place while teaching fifth grade at a laboratory elementary school connected with a small, private liberal arts college nestled in the foothills of the Appalachians. Instead of the participant-observer role researchers often take, I took the role of observant participant, maintaining an orientation of reflectivity while immersing oneself in practice. I collected data in many ways, but most powerful was my own teacher journal. I made use of Max van Manen's approach to qualitative research (van Manen, 1990). His model is based on "textual reflection: The research process is inseparable from the writing process, as writing forces the person into a reflective attitude. My interest was distinctly qualitative and phenomenological: not to reduce what I was doing, but to reveal the essential meanings of theme study as it was experienced in my classroom.

What do I mean by Theme Study?

There are a range of meanings and practices incorporated under the rubric theme study. Interdisciplinary, project method, inquiry approach, topic work, unit teaching, integrated studies, and issues centered are all terms that have been applied to a thematic approach. I started out with theme study defined for me as a student-centered approach that "emphasizes a coherent and holistic approach to learning through the study of broad themes rather than compartmentalized subject areas" (Gamberg et al., 1988, p. 5). A theme becomes the core of the curriculum, incorporating many traditional subjects within it, and developing over a long period of time. A theme can be the large umbrella or tent providing a structure for activities, materials, and people to interact and explore together (Kessens, 1984). Thematic instruction incorporates processes that involve focusing on meaning to make sense of the world and relying on one's intelligence to solve problems and discover relationships. It is the essence of learning for a purpose, where skills are identified as necessary tools for achieving a higher purpose. This higher purpose became more my focus as "big questions" surfaced in the curriculum.

Why are we Here? Theme Study in Practice

I began the year with the theme "Why are we here?" This theme had been developing in my mind during the summer. It was a way to coalesce a very real question for the children with curricula areas familiar to me as well as expected of fifth graders. I began by webbing the different connections and areas I saw as connected to our study (See Figure 1). The student connection was toward school: Why are we in school? I planned to incorporate some

study of school in America as well as some history of our own school. I linked the theme to two major subject areas: geography in social studies and geology in science. Geography related to why particular surroundings are around us and why we were in these particular surroundings. Map study was an important part of that, as the usual way to begin fifth grade social studies. Going out from local geography to national geography also fit into this area. In geology, my focus was how the land around us was formed, exploring the forces changing the Earth. I searched through various literature catalogues and resources to find children's literature that would relate to these issues. I had already decided to begin with Call it Courage (Sperry, 1940), since I had often used it before to begin the year. I settled on Bridge to Terabithia (Paterson, 1977), as it related both to school experiences and imaginary lands.

The theme of differences and understanding became the focus for our work with literature. Bridge to Terabithia expressed deep universal understanding for dealing with gender differences, value differences, socio-economic differences, and religious differences. Written responses to questions, relating to students' opinions, values, and prior experiences, formed the basis for involving each child in small group discussion. By having each child reflect in writing on issues raised in the literature, everyone could be drawn into discussions of these differences.

1. "It had never occurred to Jess that parents were meant to be understood..."(p. 67). What is puzzling about parents to you? What don't you understand about parents?
2. Why do you think it was such a big deal at Jess's school for someone to blab to the school about your home problems?
3. How is the Burke family different from the Aarons family? Give several examples of how the families are different.
4. Why does Leslie want to go to church? (Questions from response sheet for Bridge to Terabithia, 9/23/91).

My reading discussion groups allowed us to jointly construct deeper understandings of the meanings in the book. I attempted to negotiate understandings with the children, borrowing from their experiences and examining issues of interest they raised. Through my questioning, I attempted to challenge their initial reactions. This allowed us to together attempt to investigate deeper issues raised by the literature. I did not just discuss the book, but used it as a springboard for broadening our discussion to our own lives and the society in which we live. The literature became the instrument for inquiring into our own realities, broadening our knowledge about the world.

Geology research groups became the core of theme study in the classroom. Although little else in the curriculum revolved around geology, the research groups took the center stage in terms of my study. I conceived of these research groups as the form through which I could introduce students to the group inquiry process, to the creation of texts, and to taking the role of teachers. My aim was to create a culture of learning, where all were focused on becoming learners, toward the goal of sharing their expertise with others. I wanted to meld the theme study approach of Gamberg et al. (1988), characterized by the process of planning, researching, synthesizing and presenting, with a community of learning approach, involving

learning groups followed by teaching groups as conceived by Brown and Campione (1990).

Research Groups as the Center for Theme Study

Creating and implementing theme study involves basically four components: planning, researching, synthesizing, and presenting. Even before the planning process begins, teachers should be aware of their broad goals in using theme study. The objectives of theme study should involve children learning "how to learn, how to think for themselves, how to be active learners who dare to try new things when solving problems, and how to accept and apply constructive criticism" (Gamberg et al., p. 29, 1988). Katz and Chard (1989) identify four learning goals for project work: (1) expanding students' knowledge by relating knowledge to prior experience through active construction; (2) providing a context for acquiring, applying, and practicing emerging skills; (3) strengthening the disposition to become involved and absorbed in mind-engaging work; and (4) feeling accepted, comfortable and competent in a classroom community. These goals and objectives are appropriate for theme study in classrooms, but the goal of empowerment of learners and teachers is also necessary (Altwerger, Edelsky, & Flores, 1987). Empowerment involves demystifying knowledge and the forces that constrain us, implementing democracy within classrooms and schools, and working on understanding and changing larger social contexts. With these larger goals in mind, the teacher is ready to begin the planning process.

Planning. Planning theme study begins with selecting a theme. Selecting a broad theme for the year and broad sub-themes below it should be done initially by the teachers. Students should have the opportunity to develop the sub-themes related to their interests. In selecting a theme, teachers need to consider how it contributes to the school curriculum, its value in preparing students for later life, its applicability to students' current lives, and the advantages of its study in school rather than elsewhere (Katz & Chard, 1989). Themes need to be broad enough to divide into interesting subtopics with clear relationships to the theme. They should involve important topics and ideas which can generate powerful questions. Themes should provide a lens through which to look at different subject matters, revealing similarities and contrasts while fascinating those involved (Perkins, 1989).

In groups, children should create a web of potential ideas for the study. After they've finished their webs, bring the class together to generate a class web, emphasizing the questions children are interested in finding more about (Glover, 1990). Then the teacher can return to the teacher group and web the key ideas previously generated with the interests of the students. Teachers should generate activities, research questions, and resources relevant to the subtopics. Teachers might want to create several webs: an interdisciplinary web which shows the integration and correlation of various subject areas (Jacobs, 1989); an objectives web which clarifies goals in such areas as academic concepts, process skills, attitudes, multicultural and home connections, and classroom climate; and a language arts web which delineates ways reading, writing, listening, and speaking will be integrated into the theme. Webs should provide a way of showing in diagram form the many possible directions which study could lead, as well as the interrelatedness of concepts, materials, and subjects (Kessens, 1984).

Research. Research is used here in a very broad sense, as all the activities related to the theme in which students participate. An entire range of activities could be an ongoing part

of theme study, some within certain subjects and others across many subjects. Activities should be marked by their interactive nature, allowing active and expressive processes in collaboration with others. These can include literature-based activities, writing projects, science experiments, art experiences, mathematics problem-solving, plays, simulations, field trips, games, and just about anything else that can be woven into the theme. Literature is an important part of exploring a theme, as it provides personal identification and powerful emotional experiences with areas where personal experience is limited (Levstik, 1986). Works of fictional and nonfictional literature should be selected carefully and incorporated throughout the study of the theme.

At the heart of the theme study approach is guided research: the projects (Gamberg et al., 1988). These are the investigative activities where students explore sources of information, assimilate new knowledge, and identify and revise their previous conceptions through interaction with their classmates and teacher (Katz & Chard, 1989). Study begins with carefully planned introductory activities which provide a common focus for the class (Kneip, 1979). Working together with others is an important part of this process, as children are grouped and regrouped.

Groups begin by brainstorming the subtopic which they've chosen. From the brainstormed web, the group creates charts which begin to categorize their knowledge. An important part of this process is continually developing lists of questions with partners or groups (Gamberg et al., 1988). Once a list of questions has been generated, the teacher can help guide the group to resources, activities, and processes that would be fruitful to pursue. Information can be gathered and recorded through notes, charts, drawings, constructions, interviews, field trips, etc. Opportunities should be taken to go outside the classroom to gather information and have concrete experiences with the topic under study (Wigginton, 1985). Students should make full use of their families and communities in their study, interviewing family and community members, scheduling speakers, and investigating situations in their own communities.

The teacher will need to present mini-lessons at various points, with either small groups or the whole class, to explore the processes required. These might involve data-recording skills, investigative processes, disciplinary background knowledge, or other areas as needed for their research and presentations. The teacher should be meeting with groups at regular intervals, facilitating and conversing about their projects. When an aspect of project work becomes a problem for many students, class meetings can be called to articulate the problem and collaboratively develop solutions. The gathering of information can be the most challenging part of the process as students and teacher struggle to find appropriate resources. However, students, working in groups on questions they generate themselves, are capable of studying topics of great depth and complexity (Gamberg et al., 1988).

Synthesizing. Synthesis allows the student to own the information in a way different from the mere reporting of information. Ongoing classroom discussion can provide initial opportunities for synthesis. It should also involve rewriting or re-recording the information into presentable formats different from the original sources. Brainstorming at this point helps students see the relationships between ideas, as well as how much they've learned (Gamberg et al., 1988). It sometimes might be helpful to ask students to put away their notes and just write

or talk about what they remember about their topic (Glover, 1990). Then, with the help of the teacher, the group can choose a way of presenting the information from a range of possibilities, such as booklets, audio recordings, posters, games, models, dramatizations, etc. A new level of understanding emerges as students organize what they've learned into different categories and methods of presentation.

Presenting. Presenting is the essential aspect of theme study that is so often lacking in traditional classrooms. It provides the purpose for learning, as students become authors and teachers, using their new-found knowledge in the service of helping others learn. Presentation also provides great motivation for honing the knowledge and skills required to produce articulate work. Presenting can take many different forms. I am especially excited by the idea that these research groups would prepare materials and booklets with which they could teach others (Brown & Campione, 1990). This might involve using the computer to publish a booklet from which to teach, along with posters and models. Research groups would then be split up into learning groups, with an expert from each research group teaching the others in the learning group. There can also be presentations to the whole class, displays prepared for the room, and public presentations to parents and community.

Geology Groups: Opportunities and Constraints

For geology research, I created eight research groups based on their interest in questions which they generated. Each group was given the challenge: become expert enough to teach your peers. We then practiced the research process together, developing sub-questions from a question, brainstorming areas to research, and putting answers into charts. Groups then researched and began the long process of creating textbooks from which they could teach other groups. We began each research session reviewing how the group work was progressing, and ended each work session reflecting on our research and group processes. Finally, groups taught in teaching groups and each group led an activity with the whole class related to their area.

Some problems became apparent as the research process proceeded. Too much emphasis seemed to be put on the process of research, with not enough emphasis on the study and active exploration of geology. Some students appeared to not be pulling their weight in their groups, instead "hitchhiking" on the efforts of others. The entire process seemed too time consuming. Finally, in students teaching to their peers in small groups, there was a distinct lack of active participation of their peers. Students were just too passive!

There were obvious positives that resulted from this process as well. Students had the opportunity to experiment with different roles in our theme studies. At times, they could be apprentice learners, gaining the skills of independent and collaborative research (Brown, 1990). The collaborative setting encouraged them to overtly use, and observe others using, critical thinking strategies as they made decisions in their groups. They began to be authors of knowledge, designing their own textbooks to share their knowledge, although they often synthesized their findings at a very surface level. They were encouraged to become experts in their particular study. Students as experts had to translate the factual knowledge they had investigated into structures for representing that knowledge in ways understandable by their peers.

Students were also teachers, sharing their expertise with the entire class. Expertise did not rest solely with the teacher, but was distributed throughout the classroom. A community of learning began to form, focused on not just expanding one's own knowledge, but helping others learn about one's topic (Brown & Campione, 1990). Student expertise began to become expected and valued by the community.

Native American studies : Changes

My next theme revolved around looking at the state of Native Americans before white people and the conflict between the two cultures. In a way, this grew out of the materials I selected. Looking through catalogues, I settled on The Double Life of Pocahontas (Fritz, 1983). I bought a guide to accompany the book which stressed the conflict between cultures (Ellis, 1990). I was also interested in Native Americans' strong connection to nature. In previous years I had explored with children some of the beliefs and ways of thinking about nature which Native Americans held. I hoped to bring in writing and art experiences that would help connect us to some of those ways of thinking.

I then attempted to weave our study of Native Americans into as much of the curriculum as possible. We experienced some sense of Native American connection to the natural cycles of nature through activities emphasizing Native American religion and art (LaChapelle & Bourque, 1974). Stories from Seven Arrows (Storm, 1972) brought us an appreciation for a Native American perspective on nature. I extended these perspectives through much creative writing. Poetry stood out as an especially powerful medium to express this intimate association with the natural world. We read Native American poetry, songs and prayers (Bierhorst, 1971) and then wrote our own.

I chose an abbreviated form of research for our Indian study. I copied a blank chart for each student, with seven preset categories across the top. These categories related to general areas raised by the students' questions. I then assigned each child a Native American tribe, and gave them one book from the library. While there were two or three students researching tribes in each Indian culture region, they basically did their own research, partly in class and partly at home, to find the information required to fill the chart for their particular Indian tribe. They were encouraged to find out as much as they could, with the distinct goal of filling in each of the categories.

I then asked students representing each Indian culture region to stand together before the class and share the knowledge they had found about their tribe, while class members each filled in their individual chart (see Figure 2). Thus students were able to be in the teacher role, with the support of myself as classroom teacher. Some students read from prepared reports, others read from their filled-in chart, and others read from notes. Many shared pictures from the books they had used for their research. As a class, we had the opportunity to discuss various pieces of information, share stories of experiences that supported the information, and view interesting pictures the students had found.

I took a leadership role in keeping all students involved and directing discussion to differences that had come to light. I led discussions over how to summarize sometimes disparate facts in a form we could put in our chart, and made sure all the students were involved in the presentations from the students. Our culminating event was to put together a

display case for the school lobby on our studies. This concrete goal added a clear sense of purpose to our studies, as we attempted to translate some of our findings into projects that would express the special qualities of Native American culture. The resulting display was an impressive summation of our study.

Exploring the Unknown: Inquiry Reveals Itself

My next theme was "Exploring the Unknown" (see Figure 3). There appeared to be a natural connection between the different subjects involved: early explorers of America, astronomy and exploring the universe, math problem-solving, and our literature book, James and the Giant Peach, a fantasy journey across the ocean. As I webbed the various topics, I added resources with which I was familiar, areas of inquiry, and various directions for study. This became my outline for action, my source for referring to further ideas.

It was through other activities around the theme of "Exploring the Unknown" that I began to form more of an understanding of alternative modes of knowing. My planning included a pre-packaged debate over the question of who really discovered America (Lacey & Bovberg, 1987). Students assumed the roles of seven explorers, each claiming to be the true discoverer of America, presenting their case through questioning by another student. Background information for each explorer and questions for the questioner were supplied in the teacher's guide. My students prepared carefully to answer their questions, and we invited parents and the fourth grade class in for our debate.

More exciting for me was the discussion afterwards. Challenging students to really explore the problem we had just enacted, I attempted to have knowledge seen as something worth debating, not staid facts and set answers. Sitting around our tables, many participated in generating ideas and weighing our thinking. Using an excerpt from the writings of historian Samuel Eliot Morison (Beck, 1977), students were forced to judge the nature of knowledge.

The excitement the students experienced in this discussion led me to a better understanding of the importance of exploring "big" problems with the students. I was negotiating with the students a group inquiry into the nature of history, connecting facts to their own interpretations while jointly constructing a group understanding of the process of history. "Big" problems had enough meat on them to afford us a look in detail, the existence of alternative interpretations, and no clearly established right answer.

I was struck by this different relationship to knowledge. Already, my astronomy activities were becoming a time-consuming, in-depth process marked by my attempts to negotiate knowledge with the students. A discussion in class on reasons for the seasons turned into a hard look at naive theories and a forceful push to logically justify each theory. I was encouraging questioning and multiple connections as students began presenting their individual planet research. Questioning knowledge, inquiring into the meanings behind the facts, was fast becoming the enterprise that I saw as primary in my classroom.

> This is exactly the type of relationship to knowledge which I am interested in promoting. I must see "thematic" pale in comparison to "inquiry" as the focus for the relationship to knowledge. Themes might promote curriculum which pushes us to inquire, but by no means will that necessarily happen. Projects push kids more in that

> direction. I've seen that this week as kids report to the class on their planet posters. As kids take on the role of producer of knowledge, knowledge which they have researched and selected, they identify themselves with that knowledge. It becomes their's. They are a mini-expert, standing in front of the class telling what they know, proud of their accomplishment and of `their' planet. And the other kids respond with valuable questions, interest in knowing more, as Ted did in asking Kirsten about relative sizes of Mars' moons. (Teacher Journal, 1/18/92).

In designing our planet research, I was concerned with creating this sense of a culture of learning. Individual planet reports gave each child a chance to become an expert on their particular planet, with a clear goal of presenting their new-found knowledge to the class. Each student was responsible for selecting and researching their own planet or astronomical object, using library books and any other sources they could find. They were to prepare a presentation to the class on their planet, creating a poster and brochure to aid them in their presentation. Planet posters and brochures made that knowledge public while allowing the student creativity in expression. Teaching the class put the student in a different role, both sharing and defending their efforts.

> ...when Nate told us of the high temperatures on Venus, I questioned why they were so high. Nate mentioned the many clouds. We looked again at what those clouds were, mostly carbon dioxide. What is carbon dioxide? Various kids mentioned breathing, trees, and plants. Someone mentioned the ozone and heating of earth. So I pushed further into the greenhouse effect and global warming. Many had heard about these and were concerned. How was it related to Venus and carbon dioxide clouds? So we discussed pollution, deforestation, and warming, and connected it to Venus. Someone brought up the possibility of trees on Venus, and we discussed trees changing Venus' atmosphere to more oxygen . . . (Teacher Journal, 1/26/92).

I took an active role in nudging the class toward clarifying and questioning the knowledge presented. I wanted discussions to flow from the presentations; discussions that promoted an inquiring approach toward knowledge while supporting the development of those in the class.

Our explorer research did not progress as smoothly as the astronomy research. The research process was somewhat more open-ended, the content not as interesting to the students, and the portfolio piece not as riveting. I listed on the board what type of information kids needed to research as well as a list of five options for presenting their research. The next day I handed out materials: a book about each explorer to each student within groups representing countries. I helped structure the discussion to lead toward each group providing an experience from their country while each individual in the group would research, with help from others in the group, their particular explorer. Students compiled their information in chart format to be able to record the information they learn from each person's presentation.

Students connected well to the research process, both in astronomy and in our explorers study. A social context was being established during our research presentations where students felt comfortable questioning each other and the knowledge we generated. Individual roles in

knowledge generation were being created that went beyond the traditional teacher/student dichotomy. Although knowledge construction was still constrained by these roles and my enaction of curriculum, I felt we had made much progress in creating a social context where students could take roles as active questioners. Beginning with questioning each other about the content of our presentations, we had occasionally moved toward questioning knowledge and its connections to our own experiences.

Taking off on Investigations: A Larger Theme Evolves

The theme of "Taking Off on Investigations" was created figuring we were investigating life as a pioneer along with investigating the nature of heat energy. I webbed "Taking Off on Investigations" to include the two major content areas (See Figure 4). Heat energy study was to be based on Ice Cubes (Elementary Science Study, 1987) and my attempts at conceptual change instruction (Hausfather, 1992). The study of the westward movement involved the reading of Caddie Woodlawn (Brink, 1935) and associated writing, a simulation of life on the wagon train to Oregon (Wesley, 1974), and student research on the states. Investigating, thought of as problem solving or coming to an understanding of events, quickly became a focus in the classroom.

The wagon train simulation allowed the children to participate in real problem-solving discussion time, where occurred genuine attempts to convince each other based on one's own thinking. The students were intensely involved in the process and the problems encountered. There was lively debate as they explored the positives and negatives of problems. They were quite determined to come to decisions that they see as valid and agreeable to all. Students were the leaders of the discussion, structuring it so everyone had a chance, seriously exploring each detail of the decision, questioning and debating fine points, searching out further information, and developing supporting arguments for their position. Open-mindedness to other perspectives was evident, as they built on each other's arguments. I stayed out of the way except to help keep things moving along or challenge occasional faulty reasoning. Different levels of moral and logical reasoning are apparent in the group, yet higher stages are more vocal, raising the level of thinking for the entire group. We were getting closer here to the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Joint problem solving actively involved all the students in a social transaction, allowing students to do collaboratively what they were not yet ready to do alone. In our group work existed the type of collaboration that involved all in hard thinking, not for me but for themselves.

I did not involve the students in the process of determining the form or content of their state reports, instead dictating the parameters within which they were to perform. The result appeared to be a lack of personal identification in the reports on their states. Even though these were more reports than our other research had been, the students expected to share them. They took the lead in expressing the opinion that doing research was not for an individual alone, but a means to share with your peers. The students approached the presentation with a sharing attitude, comfortable in telling what they know. There was much interest by students, but the atmosphere was somewhat chaotic. Some students were not focused enough, even when I attempted to structure it more. I took all the chances I could find to make connections to geography, history, vegetation, etc. I also expected students to fulfill the assignment. The

class was disappointed in those who didn't have the information they were supposed to have collected. I tried to move kids away from reading their report to the class, instead emphasizing telling their own stories from memory. Yet I encouraged this type of information reporting through the report format I had instituted. The attention of the class was hard to maintain in this student-lecture format. Yet the students teaching were focused on being the teacher, proud and eager to share their accumulated knowledge.

The year theme, "Exploring Stereotypes", revealed itself in our themes throughout the year. It was most apparent in the literature we read. We started our year exploring what the label "coward" meant in the book Call it Courage (Sperry, 1940). We moved on to discuss dealing with differences between people of very different socioeconomic backgrounds in Bridge to Terabithia (Paterson, 1977). The Double Life of Pocahontas (Fritz, 1983) focused on the clash of cultures between Native Americans and Europeans. In James and the Giant Peach (Dahl, 1961), living with people of quite different personalities was highlighted by the various insect creatures aboard the peach. We were able to look at basic human emotions as being very separate from the body in which they resided. Caddie Woodlawn (Brink, 1935) explored in depth the stereotyping of Native Americans: racism and fears of people different from you; creating an enemy (Sadaam Hussein); as well as why one would use the label "Tomboy". Our last book, The Slave Dancer (Fox, 1973), added a human face to the horror of slavery and the portrayal of African-Americans.

Within our own classroom, class meetings often focused on understanding differences between others. An emphasis was placed on listening to the viewpoints of those different from you, and seeing the similarities instead of the differences. Our various explorer studies emphasized the views of explorers about the lands and peoples they explored. Our debates defined "discovery" through its impact on native peoples. Our Pioneer simulation again emphasized an understanding of human nature and the types of decisions people had to make. Lastly, our Civil War studies tried to understand the conditions of African-Americans along with the thinking of white Americans at the time.

These were "big ideas" exactly because they touched our own experiences. "Human beings require stories to give meaning to the facts of their existence" (Postman, 1989, p. 122). Literature began to be seen as a way to make sense of the world. It was not just the world of long-ago, as related to our social studies theme. By continually relating back to the experiences of the children, the literature became a focus-point for discussion to understand the interaction of our studies with students' lives. These were powerful ideas thus tied to student experience.

> In a way, the choices of literature and content create the themes more than even the conscious choices I make as a teacher. Thus the deadliness of textbooks, where the themes are purposefully amorphous and whitewashed, purposefully disconnected. The power to create my own curriculum, although somewhat circumscribed by the state and national curriculum, has allowed me to see into the materials we use, to get excited about what I deem important in the reading and in the studies we do. Because I make up the questions, because I read and analyze and think through for myself, it is my choices which are able to become the curriculum. If it only wasn't so much damn

> work! I want that power, but I don't always want the responsibility it creates. Give me a text, I often moan, so I can sit back for a moment, not have to do everything, think everything through. Escape from freedom comes through, for freedom is work. I've only used one literature book this year that I've used before. That has forced me to review the books myself, really re-see what was in the books and get excited about the issues I saw coming from them. (Teacher Journal, 3/28/92).

I was struggling with my meaning of a theme study classroom. Truly seizing the power to create curriculum with the children meant both allowing the children to experience the materials of instruction in their own ways, and forcing my "teacher" self to seize the opportunity to go where the children lead me. When I could do that, it allowed us to reveal the deep issues which the literature revealed in ourselves.

Greed and Charity: "Big" Questions take Precedence

Studying the civil war fit clearly within the developing year theme of "Exploring Stereotypes", as well as the progression of social studies topics surrounding United States history. I wanted the theme, however, to be broader than just the civil war. I wanted it to fit into our science, literature, language arts, and mathematics studies as well. I came up with the idea of using the broader question, "Why do people act as they do?" This could then involve my planned study of the human body in science as well as encompassing a business simulation in mathematics. Our literature study, The Slave Dancer (Fox, 1973), fit in well with this theme in its view of human nature struggling with the realities of the slave trade just prior to the civil war.

It was only during our studies that I began to see this study as revolving around a duality in human nature. It was not only why people acted as they did, but how humans struggled with the conflicting forces of greed and charity in themselves and those around them. This understanding began to take shape as we went to the public library history room,

> where we gathered around a table to peruse a copy of the Weekly Courier from 1860. We found some slave ads, "Negroes for sale", and the kids were just as interested in the other ads and what they were for. ...I read several articles to the group, one about not talking about the abolition movement in front of slaves, one about the slave trade, one about Lincoln, and one about rewards for turning in deserters. Most of the kids were spellbound by the paper, how totally different it was from today, how the perspectives on life were different, ... about the conditions of selling slaves, prices, splitting families, raising slaves to sell them, and why different slaves could cost different amounts, especially women. This source document impressed the kids greatly, causing them to ask many questions and really see how different life was in the not-so-distant past. (Teacher Journal, 5/3/92).

This was a profound experience for all of us involved in it. A number of parents spoke to me of the impact it had on their children. Students were deeply impressed with how different life was in 1860. I was deeply impressed at the intensity with which the children

approached the document. The sharing of purpose and focus associated with intersubjectivity was reached, where there existed a joint process of cognitive, social, and emotional interchange (Rogoff, 1990). All of us around the table questioned and answered, explored and wondered. The old newspaper made concrete the world of long ago in a way that allowed us to see it in a new light. It also opened more questions than ever I as the teacher could answer. In their discussion, we all became inquirers, stretching our minds to understand.

We watched and discussed the "Roots" series on filmstrips. Once again, the use of story was an important vehicle for creating understandings connected to the human experience. Viewing the story of one African's life, and the struggle of his family to attain freedom and dignity, allowed the students to experience the implications of slavery firsthand. It also allowed us all to go beyond the usual depictions of slaves, to a deeper understanding of the derivations of the yearning for freedom that is a part of us all. Considering a deeper strength of African custom became a continuing emphasis throughout our study of slavery. It deepened both the students' and my understandings of the African-American experience.

Our reading book The Slave Dancer reinforced our ongoing experiences with slavery, adding another human face to the experience. The story drew the students into another aspect of slavery, the slave trade. More than that, it raised the important issue of how people stereotype a group of people in order to see them as less than human.

The emphasis in the book on how the crew of a slave ship dealt with the horrors of their job allowed for discussion on our theme of why people act as they do. We began to see in the book's characters the struggle between greed and charity. The characters were locked in internal conflict, pitted between their greed, in taking a job on a slaver, and their sense of charity, in viewing the horrible suffering of the slaves and each other as well. This became a focus of our discussions, as we tried to understand how people could act toward others as the slavers acted toward the slaves. At the same time, we dealt with the conflict between slaver and slave, trying to understand how the slaves could survive such terror. These were deep human experiences we were involved in describing, and the students responded with empathy and interest in trying to understand.

The riots in Los Angeles over the Rodney King beatings occurred this same week, and became an important topic of discussion in our class. Our study of slavery was propitiously timed as politics and students' experiences and concerns at home paralleled our historical study in class. Moving back and forth from our school study to the events in the world around them allowed me to tie in our historical study. More importantly, it created a real link between our burgeoning historical knowledge and the events unfolding today. Thus the lines between school knowledge and personal knowledge fell away (McNeil, 1986). School knowledge became important to the students for understanding their world, a part of the cultural content they were experiencing outside school walls. We were not creating answers so much as understanding what the problems were.

This excitement in the quest for knowledge is such an important part of both teaching and learning. Knowledge needs to be alive to be negotiated. It is when the teacher and the student both hold identifiable stakes in the knowledge that real conversation and negotiation can occur. We had all become stakeholders in this knowledge negotiation and creation, committed to understanding the relationship between our school studies and the world around

us. That link to the outside world was quite clear, and made our studies all the more vital.

A simulation of creating our own popcorn businesses (Boehm & Trull, 1983) provided an unexpected opportunity to relate our mathematics with the larger theme surrounding our study of the Civil War. Over a two week period, we abandoned all our other mathematics skill work and studied and created popcorn businesses. Larger ideas started coming out in our discussions of our businesses.

> I started the business simulation in math. What does it have to do with my theme? As I think about it, there is definitely a connection. We are looking at how people create businesses in a competitive marketplace. I need to make sure then that I connect it to how that affects how people act in our capitalist society. Why did slavery come about? Needs for cheap labor? Would that be good for our businesses? Now we have these government regulations that protect the workers, protection that they did not have before. Why? A big one: what is that balance between greed in people and human charity in people? How to find the balance, and why the balance so easily comes off kilter, falling toward greed. That's the big question behind the scenes of this math project. It's also to apply the math we've learned, to make use and have fun with math. (Teacher Journal, 5/16/92).

In tying this mathematics activity to our larger theme, the larger theme was refined and understood. I was not merely looking at why people act as they do. I was dealing in depth with the dichotomy expressed by greed and charity. In exploring these conflicting tensions in humans, I was hoping to shed light on historical, economic, and political understandings of our society. These all seemed inexorably connected, and revealing those connections became a goal in our classroom studies.

Discussion: Redefining Theme Study

The first semester of the school year laid the groundwork for defining theme study in my classroom. The second semester found theme study evolving as I defined and redefined its meaning in my classroom (See Figure 5). Ways to develop curriculum became more clearly understood as theme interacted with content and students. I experimented with various methods for involving students in instruction. Different organizational patterns evolved for implementing themes. The meaning of theme study took a more distinct form within the context of my classroom.

In creating themes that could serve as a lens through which to examine different content areas, I attempted to respond to both the needs of the disciplinary areas and the needs of the students. Each theme I designed moved closer to the ideal of disclosing fundamental patterns (Perkins, 1989). Yet, for themes to apply both broadly across a range of topic areas and pervasively within topics, themes needed to be flexibly interpreted by both the students and me. It was exactly this flexibility, allowing the evolution of the theme, which gave the theme its power to reveal connections across the curriculum.

The use of broad themes had the potential to allow the students and me to respond flexibly to the content and the materials of our studies. At times, it provided a useful schema

within which to place our studies, allowing understanding to be built through connections to our experiences and our other studies. When we could make those connections, the powerful themes which resided within the content and materials of our studies were revealed. Through our studies, and especially through discussion, our more general themes could become powerful in understanding the world around us.

Themes were redefined by the experiences of the students and the content of the materials we studied. Choices of instructional materials, especially literature and simulations, seemed pivotal in determining how themes would be ultimately interpreted. Literature added a very human face to the theme, prompting us to interpret the theme in terms of our own experiences and our relationship to story (Postman, 1989). A flexible relationship with the theme was essential, as content redefined the theme and the theme redefined content. Viewing content through the lens of the theme occasionally allowed us the perspective to delineate the powerful, crosscutting ideas existent within the content yet hidden by the veneer of disciplinary knowledge.

Themes allowed these "big ideas" to surface at times, a metaconceptual bonus allowing the students to see beyond the content materials into connections to life experiences (Ackerman & Perkins, 1989). Students could then go beyond the materials to the knowledge itself, questioning their developing knowledge. Discovery, exploration, and investigation became both topics of discussion and methodologies. Our debate over who discovered America raised exploration from the study of facts to the judgement of history. Exploring stereotypes, revealing itself as a year theme in the materials and discussions of our studies, was as much an exploration of humankind as it was an exploration of one's own self. In looking at how Europeans stereotyped Native Americans, we looked as well within ourselves and the stereotypes we held of various peoples. Discussions about the literature we read connected our own biases with those of the peoples we were studying. Our own efforts to balance greed and charity were the basis for viewing the motivations of those involved in slavery.

These powerful, crosscutting ideas sometimes allowed "big questions" to surface. Theme study gradually revealed itself to be the search to understand these "big questions" through the process of inquiry. Inquiry appeared to be a key aspect that could allow students to see beyond the content into the connections to their life experiences. Our debates, simulations, and projects began to push the children in the direction of inquiry. Beginning with questioning each other and the content students shared, we made slow movement toward questioning knowledge.

Student research became an essential aspect of projects in the classroom, moving students toward becoming experts in the classroom. Project work has the potential to "promote children's intellectual development by engaging their minds" (Katz & Chard, 1989, p.2). In groups, students brainstormed their prior knowledge and directions for inquiry. They then became researchers, beginning to make decisions about their learning. Students created texts, taught to their peers, and expressed their knowledge through various projects.

Student involvement in research was a key aspect of my conception of a theme study classroom. Through student research, students could become active stakeholders in the teaching/learning process. My goal became sharing the decision-making process with them while maintaining general leadership of the curricular process. Thus we negotiated the

development of our research projects. At first, I created the forms. Later, I gradually began to share some of the power of decision making in curriculum. Sharing that power also involved sharing the responsibility, something some students were at first hesitant to accept. I found it very hard to give up the power vested in me as the classroom teacher, really trusting the students to be co-partners in the creation of curriculum. As the year progressed, students became more comfortable negotiating with me their approach to learning. They began to take more of a role in making decisions for themselves for the direction of their study.

I strove to continue to negotiate my own and students' roles in our classroom. I was not content with students as learners and myself as teacher. I pushed the students to learn for the purpose of sharing their knowledge. Each research opportunity aimed at becoming an opportunity for students to teach each other. Each one also became a chance for me to experiment with different arrangements of the learning and teaching process (see Figure 6). I moved between group and individual responsibilities, attempting to balance individual accountability with group interaction. We used different structures for organizing our research knowledge, moving from making charts to creating books to allowing free-form notes.

Table 6. Evolution of student research opportunities.

Theme/Content	Learning Arrangement	Teaching Context
Why are we here?/ geology/geography	Cross-grade research & learning groups, create teaching texts	Individuals teach small group with text
Understanding differences/ Native Americans	Individuals research, complete chart, create artifact	Groups teach class, class fills charts
Exploring the unknown/ Astronomy	Individuals research, create poster & brochure	Individuals teach class, class creates books
Exploring the unknown/ Early U.S. explorers	Individuals research, groups collaborate, prepare notes	Individuals interviewed by class while fill charts
Investigations/ U.S. states	Individuals research, write report & poster, group edits	Individuals teach class, class takes notes
Greed & charity/ Slavery/civil war	Group or individual research, prepare notes	Group or individuals teach class, class takes notes

Throughout the year, students were assigned the role of presenters. They were to become the experts standing in front of the class, sharing their new-found knowledge. Those listening to the presentation were encouraged to clarify, question, and connect to their own experiences. The discussion during and after the presentation began to provide a non-threatening environment where ideas were encouraged rather than judged. As teacher, I could

lead and organize the questioning, modeling critical inquiry into the ideas presented. Students were encouraged to become critical questioners, tying the knowledge shared to their own interests and experiences.

As a teacher this process was both challenging and frustrating. I had to be very active in the process, moving back and forth from teacher to learner, participant to observer, careful to give students enough space to develop their own questions and problems while at the same time challenging students to be active participants. I had to model critical questioning without threatening the student/expert presenting the material. I had to create an environment that was both secure and critical. Through the action research process, I worked to deal with these demands, experimenting with different arrangements of learning and teaching.

I am not sure I moved the class far enough. Control continued to be an issue as students pushed the limits of their new-found freedoms, and I dealt with the institutional pressures to maintain expected levels of control. Students accepted the responsibility for their own learning at greatly varied levels, some readily becoming dedicated to sharing the fruits of their research, while others minimally fulfilled the group's expectations. I struggled with retaining my level of control over the routines which defined my teaching. I found it exceedingly difficult to give up control of the curriculum, as much as my reflections made me aware of my need to.

It was apparent, however, that the structure of the presentations facilitated initiating a climate of inquiry. Student note-taking along with my modeling and stimulating questioning brought us close to creating a culture of learning, where the interest of all was focused on pursuing and understanding knowledge. Students and teacher together developed knowledge in the classroom. Instructional conversations (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988) began to be created and supported in our discussions with presenters, in our book discussion groups, in our debates and simulations, allowing students to be partners in the exploration of knowledge. I felt I had , moved toward creating a theme study classroom, unique to my local context, yet powerful in impacting the conceptions of knowledge of those involved. Theme study was defined more by the use of projects and an inquiry approach to knowledge than by an interdisciplinary approach to curriculum.

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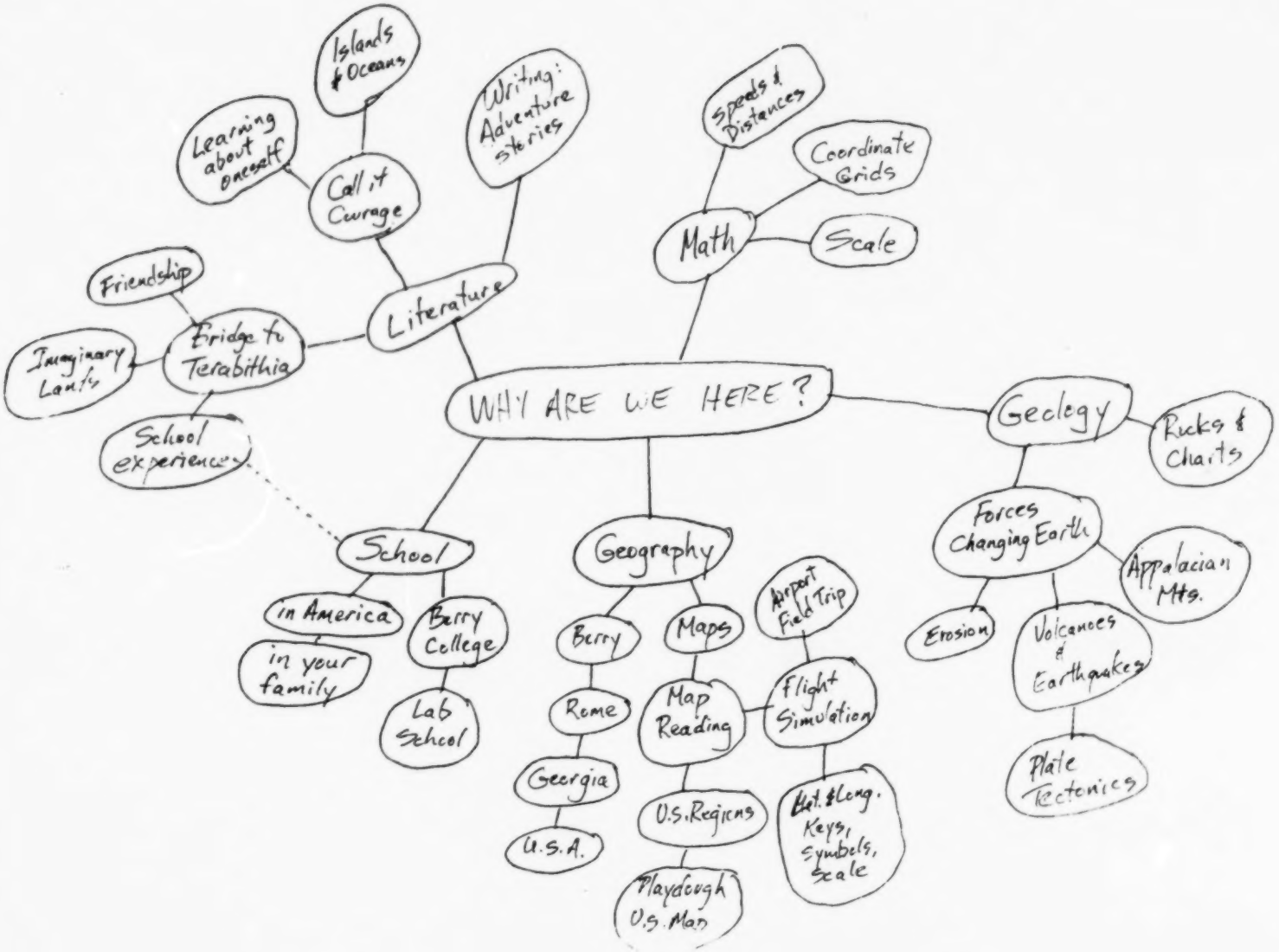

Figure 1

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Indian Culture Region	Landform Region	Tribe Names	Housing	Food	Clothing	Customs
Southeast Wood land	appalacian Mts.	Cherokee Creek Chicasaw	mudhouses log houses	hunted game Grew corn + veges	wrap around skirts + breechclouts moccasins	fasting Dancing body painting smoking lacrosse
North east woodlands	appalacian mts. Interior Plains	Iroquois Powhatan Miami Penobscot	longhouses logs, skins reeds, mud	Fishing corn beans birds squash bear deer corn	Breechcloths leggings moccasins deerskin skirts strange hair	False face society league of 5 nations
Plains	Interior Plains	Sioux Arapaho Cheyenne Comanche	Teepee of Buffalo hide + poles	All parts of Buffalo, other game trading	Buffalo + other skins leggings, breechcloths, dresses + shirts moccasins	Used Buffalo totally, Morning chants, Dancing Warring
Southwest	Rocky Mts. inter Mts. Deserts	Hopi Navajo Zuni Cliffdwellers	Caves Pueblos apartment houses	Grew vegetables corn, squash beans, Hunted small game Picked cactus	Deerskin Woven blankets	dances, songs, Mask sandpaintings kachina dolls
California	inter Mts Pacific Coast	Shoshoni Chumash Flathead Nez Pierce Ute	Domed houses of willow Tripod of sticks with rush mats or brush	Hunters + gatherers acorns + seeds game salmon	loincloth Antelope + deer skins, skirts of fox, otter, rabbit	Basket making Pottery Anap cult
Northwest	Pacific coast	Chinook Tillamook Coulite	longhouses of wood Planks several families totem poles	Seafood, Gathered fruits + nuts Hunt game	Deer, elk + bear hides Cedar bark skirts water repellant rope, woven mats	made mats, baskets Woodwork Flat heads Potlatch

Figure 2

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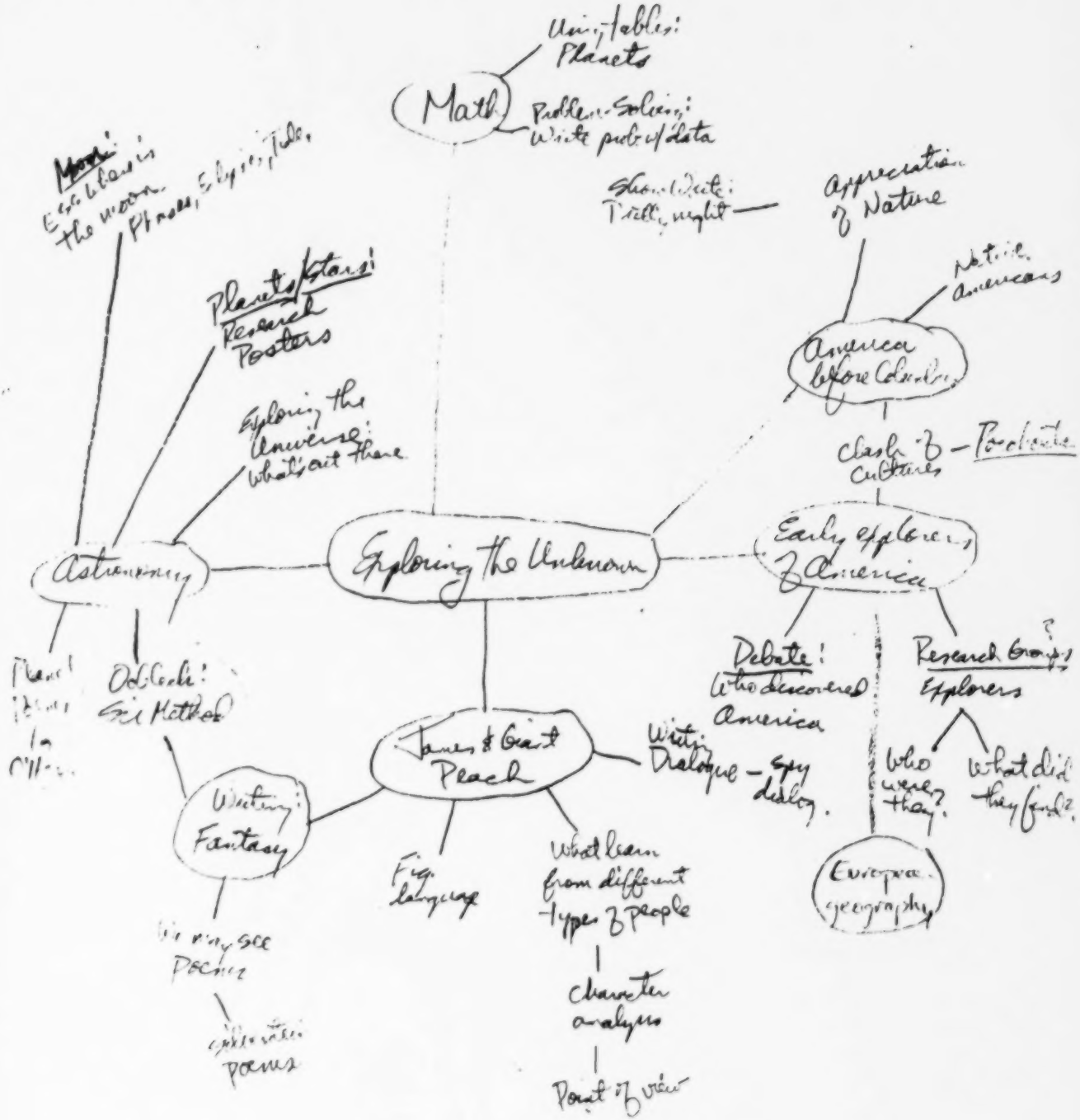

Figure 3

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Figure 4

Year calendar for my fifth-grade classroom

Theme	Month	Social Studies	Science	Literature	Writing	Events	Mathematics
Why are we here	Aug.& Sept.	Geography Flight simulation	Geology research	*Call it Courage* *Bridge to Terabithia*	Adventure	Airport	Numeration Scale maps Add/Subtraction
	Oct.				Horror	NASA demonstration	Decimals
Understand differences	Nov.	Indians research	teach activities	*Double Life of Pocahontas*	Newspaper	Unicef Festival Conferences	Multiplication
	Dec.	presentations display	evaluation			Indian sites	Division
Exploring the Unknown	Jan.	evaluation Explorers debate/research	Astronomy research presentations	*James & Giant Peach*	Poetry	Assemblies Atlanta field trip	
	Feb.	presentations Pioneers simulation	Oobleck Heat	*Caddie Woodlawn*	Dialogue Mystery		Fractions
Taking off on Investigations	Mar.	state reports maps	ice cubes			Conferences Spring program	
	Apr.	presentations Civil War	conduction experiments	*Slave Dancer*	Kid's books Storytelling	County library	Decimal mult. & div
Greed and Charity: Why people act as they do.	May & June	research auction presentations	heat/temp	*Roots*		CTBS tests Dance perf. Assembly Coast field trip	Business Simulation

Figure 1

Figure 5